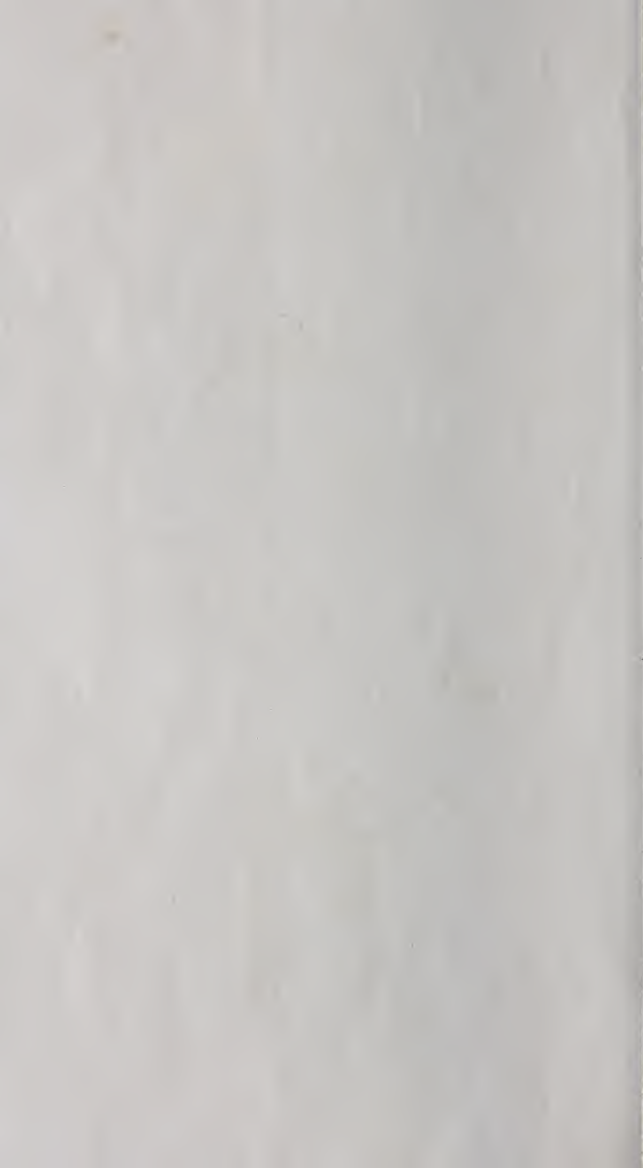






THE
GHOST
OF
MY UNCLE.

TO WHICH IS ADDED, THE
OUTWITTED TAX-GATHERER.



GLASGOW:

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1877

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GHOST

OF

MY UNCLE.

I AROSE early in the morning, and after taking a good breakfast, set out from home. A quantity of rain had fallen in the night. It was, however, fair when I commenced my expedition, and I wished it so to remain. The morning was still and beautiful; it was at the early hour of four; I could not yet distinguish the sun, though I was sensible he had left his ocean bed from the beautiful streaks of colouring in the eastern sky. To express the softness, mildness, and calmness of the scenery, at that hour, I cannot find adequate words; those only can conceive it who have witnessed the scene. I had not proceeded more than two miles, before a few drops alarmed me with apprehension of a soaking shower, from a heavy black cloud that was slowly sailing over my head, and my fears were soon realized by a very thick descent that followed, on which I betook my-

self with all speed to a thatched cottage, that saw at some distance, for shelter.

Many years had elapsed since I had wandered about in this spot in careless infancy, and the pretty secluded cot to which I was advancing, had once been my home. I looked around on the hills and dales, and could easily recognise them as my old acquaintances. ‘Ha,’ said I, ‘ye change not your appearance, ye grow not old in the course of time, the feebleness of age cometh not upon you;---ye still smile in the brightness of summer, and frown in the lowering winter. For ages ye have reared your towering crests, and given food to the flocks and the herds that have chequered your dark surface; ye have given a direction to the murmuring brook that proceeds from you, till it seeks, far distant, the mighty ocean; and while generation after generation hath passed away, ye have preserved unvaried the features ye possessed in ages gone---Even now, as in years past, my eyes behold the till sunshine sleeping upon your gentle sloping declivities, interrupted only when the light cloud of spring, for a moment, casts over them its passing shadow! My cogitations were suddenly interrupted by the gate at the end of the pasture, which I opened. In another moment I was in the porch of the cottage; I lifted the latch, and went

in. The house appeared just the same as I had left it ten years before. The furniture was the same, and each piece occupied the same position. The old clock stood ticking in the corner, as it had done for four-score years, the oaken settle remained behind the door, and my uncle's antique two armed chair by the fire-side; but I saw no living creature in the house besides the cat on the hearthstone. I listened awhile, but could hear nothing. At this I rather wondered, as of yore the house was seldom, scarcely ever, totally deserted. I then went forward into the spence, or country parlour, where I found several neighbour cousins and the servants, all standing in deep silence around the bed of my dying uncle.

On entering, all eyes turned upon me; I was a stranger to most of them; there were, however, one or two who remembered me. I advanced to the bed-side, and the countenance of my uncle for a moment brightened up at my approach, but soon subsided again into a cold tranquil indifference. It was plain that death was rapidly approaching. He had been speechless several hours; consequently we could hold no conversation. He, however, put out his hand, which I grasped with an affection redoubled by the prospect of soon losing him for ever. In my younger days I had lived

with him, and he having no children of his own, was then remarkably fond of me; subsequently that affection was strengthened between us, and although circumstances had cast my lot in another country, yet we had kept up a friendly and affectionate intercourse. Some time previous to his indisposition, I had again removed to within thirty miles of his residence, which was the place from whence I set out on this sorrowful visit.

My uncle was a man of sound judgment, keen observation, and cheerful social disposition, joined to a thorough knowledge of mankind; he possessed a good portion of eccentricity and humour. He loved a cheerful glass; he was kind to his servants, and dependants, and though rather of a frugal and saving disposition, yet he was charitable to his poor neighbours. In his friendships he was rather capricious, but firm in his attachment to the kirk and government of his country. He was apt to be a little passionate and hasty in his temper; but his resentment was seldom of long duration. He was well beloved by those among whom he dwelt, and might be pronounced a good neighbour, and an excellent subject. By a long course of industry in his profession, he had amassed a pretty good property, the knowledge of which had drawn around him a host of needy

relations, who besieged him with flattery and professions, but those attentions were chiefly drawn forth by their hopes of inheriting the old man's property. How he had willed it was not known. He was a man of prudence, and seldom blabbed out his private affairs.

On my arrival, I found all the friends about him remarkably attentive and duteous in their behaviour, though it was evident that a good deal of the affection was assumed. Shortly after, he fell into a kind of a dose, and all left the room save an attendant or two. Peggy, the servant who had lived with my uncle fourteen years, now insisted on my taking some refreshment. But I was too much agitated to feel any thing like pleasure in my repast, and what I ate was more to please the faithful old domestic, than from any inclination of my own. When my slight meal was over, I got up and went to the window in a serious and reflecting mood. The afternoon was far advanced, and the scenery without was wrapped in tranquillity. I was soon summoned from my station to the parlour. My uncle had somewhat revived, and his speech had returned. He told us death was making rapid advances, and that we might soon expect the moment of his dissolution. He informed us where we should find his will, and gave us some excellent advice on our future conduct.

Some things he requested us to perform, which I thought were a little odd. He wished us to read his will in the room where he was, immediately after he had expired. He desired that he might not be laid out, as it is commonly called, until at least twelve hours after his departure; that his large two armed oaken chair might be placed in all order and solemnity at the head of the table every meal, and that it should remain unoccupied till after his funeral. He also wished to be interred in a very deep grave. All these requests we promised faithfully to observe, when, after taking an affectionate farewell of each, he quietly resigned himself to his pillow; his breathing became more and more faint, till at last we could perceive it no more.

During these transactions my mind was in a state I cannot well describe: my thoughts were all confusion, while at the same time I struggled to be calm and composed. Poignant as were my feelings, I gazed on my dying relative with a sort of apathy and grief, and at the moment when nature was yielding up the contest I could not shed a tear. In a short time all quitted the apartment, and I was left alone. The branches of the huge elm trees, with their thickening foliage, partially screening the window, made it, under such circumstances,

awfully gloomy and tranquil. I took several turns about the room, and with a soft step I approached the bed, gazed a moment, turned away, and then going up to the window, strove to divert my thoughts by looking at the surrounding landscape. Twilight was descending, and the sober hues of evening gradually enveloped the lofty hills. No sound struck my ear, except the faint and low murmers of the brook, which brawled down the valley at the bottom of the Flinty Knowe---the shout, softened by distance, of the peasant committing his herds to the pasture---and now and then the solitary barking of a shepherd's dog among the echoing dales, attendant on his master looking out his charge for the night.

I had not stood at the casement many minutes when my cousins, all talking in a rude, noisy, and indecorous manner, came into the room with the will, which it seems they had departed in search of the moment the testator had expired. I was a good deal shocked at the frivolity they manifested, and could not help reproving them, though in a mild and gentle manner, for the little respect they paid to the deceased. 'Why ye ken,' said one, 'he tauld us to read the will amaist as soon as he died.' 'Ay,' cried another, 'and sae in conformity wi' his command, we went straight up the stairs and

rummaged o'er his auld kist, till we found it.' 'Mind your ain concerns, gudeman, and we'll mind ours,' rejoined a third, rather gruffly; so that my well meant admonitions had no better effect than to cause me to be more disliked by the party; for I could perceive before this that they looked on me in the light of an unwelcome intruder.

The will was now read, to which all paid the greatest attention. A mute anxiety and deep interest sat on every countenance: their aspects was, however, instantly changed into those of intense disappointment and vexation, on hearing that my uncle had made a stranger, whom none of us knew, the heir of all his property, real and personal. For my part, this circumstance did not affect me in the least. I had not had any expectation of inheriting the smallest portion; therefore could not feel disappointed. But with the others it was different; they had clung to him like so many leeches, or like the ivy to the old ruin, and with about as much affection as the two before-mentioned things have for the objects to which they so closely adhere. A most appalling and disgusting scene now took place among the disappointed legacy hunters. They abused the old man in the most shocking terms: they taxed him with injustice and villany, and even proceeded to call down imprecations upon his

lifeless corse. I shuddered at the conduct of the unprincipled villains; I trembled at the impiety of men who could, at a time the most solemn and impressive to a human being, act in a manner sufficient to call down upon them immediate and divine vengeance. I was chilled with horror. I almost expected every moment to see the lifeless corse of my uncle start from the bed, on which it lay, to take vengeance on the audacious wretches. Once, indeed, I actually thought I saw his lips quiver with rage---his eyebrows knit together---and all the muscles of his countenance contract into a dreadful frown. I shuddered at the sight, and withdrew my gaze.

At length they went into the kitchen, and I was once more left alone in the chamber of death. I went to the bed-side, and the scene I had just witnessed operated so forcibly on my feelings, that I burst into tears, and uttered aloud my lamentations over my lifeless relative. When this ebullition had somewhat subsided, I began to reflect a little where I was, and a sort of timidity came creeping over me. There is an undefinable apprehension which we feel while we are in company with the dead. We imagine, in spite of the efforts of reason, that the departed spirit is hovering near its former tenement. It being now quite dark, and having these

feelings in a strong degree, it is no wonder that I rather preferred the company of the wretches in the kitchen, than to remain long where I was.

I accordingly proceeded thither, where I found them all carousing round a large table, on which were placed the fragments of the dinner, and plenty of liquor. I reminded them of our promise to place my uncle's old two armed chair at the head of the table, as he had requested, which they had neglected to do, and which they now strenuously opposed my doing. I was, however, resolutely determined to have it done, and at length succeeded. I then retired to the fire-side, where I sat, without taking any part in the conversation, or in any thing that passed during the whole evening. I shall pass over the several succeeding hours, the whole of which they sat drinking, till they were all in a greater or less degree intoxicated, and generally brawling, wrangling, and swearing in a loud and boisterous manner. The night became stormy as it advanced. The wind arose, and at intervals moaned, sighed, and whistled shrilly without, roared in the wide chimney, and as it furiously bent the trees in which the house was embosomed, made a sound similar to the dashing of the waves on the shore of the ocean. The rain fell in torrents, and the

large drops pattered against the window with a ceaseless and melancholy cadence.

It was now getting nigh the 'witching time of night,' and I saw no signs of the revellers quitting the table. On the contrary, they grew more loud and boisterous. In obedience to their imperious commands, yet evidently with the greatest reluctance, Peggy had kept replenishing the exhausted vessels with more liquor, and their demands increased in proportion to the reluctance with which they were satisfied. At length, however, on receiving an intimation from me that I would interpose, she absolutely refused to draw any more liquor for them, telling them they had plenty, and that it was time to retire to bed. The scene that now ensued was such as is impossible for me to describe; maddened and inflamed with rage at being thus refused, the wretches began to throw the furniture up and down the house, break the glasses and jugs, and to abuse the servant, from whom they attempted to wrest the key of the cellar, yelling out at the same time the most horrid oaths and imprecations.

The table was shortly overset, and the lights put out in the scuffle, and in a few moments we should, in all probability, have had blood shed, as I felt myself roused to a pitch of fury, and was advancing with the

large heavy headed fire-poker to the assistance of the servant, who was loudly shrieking for help: just then the old clock struck twelve rapid strokes, and the bell had not ceased to vibrate, when we heard three heavy knocks, as if given by a mallet upon the wall, which separated the kitchen from the parlour where my uncle lay. There appeared to be something supernatural in this. The whole house seemed to shake to its very foundation. A deep silence ensued. I stood still. The wretches instantly became sober. We all gazed earnestly and wildly at the place from whence the noise proceeded. Scarce had we recovered from the shock, when we were again thunderstruck with a noise in the parlour; it was unlike any sound that I had ever heard before. It seemed as if all the furniture in the room was violently crashed together, mingled with the noise of fire-arms. Shrieks and exclamations burst from all.

The windows shook and every door of the habitation gave a momentary jar. I trembled with awe. I felt every hair of my head bristling upwards---my knees smote against each other---a deathly paleness sat on every countenance, and all eyes were fixed in an intense gaze on the door, at the upper part of the kitchen, which led to the staircase, buttery, and parlour. When, to complete the horror of the scene, the door burst wide

open---dashed against the wall, and in, gliding at a slow pace, came a dreadful apparition. Its countenance was that of death. It seemed to have been long the inhabitant of that dark and narrow house---the grave; the worms had revelled upon its eyes, and left nothing but the orbless sockets. The rest of the skeleton was enveloped in a long and white sheet. The horrid spectre advanced into the middle of the room. I involuntarily shrunk back---the heavy weapon dropped from my hand and rang loudly on the stone floor; overcome with terror, I sank into a chair. A cold sweat broke from my forehead, and I had well nigh fainted on its first appearance; the others had tumbled one over the other, in the greatest horror and confusion, and now lay as if dead in all directions.

The spectre gazed wildly round for a moment---at the clock---at the fire---and then turned its eyeless sockets upon each individual, motioning at the same time with its long arm, and pointing to the outer door, seemingly directing to an outlet for an escape, and wishing for their exit. They were not long in obeying this intimation, but severally crawled away on their hands and knees, with all the speed they could possibly make; none of them daring to stand upright. The spectre all the while was

standing in the middle of the floor, eyeing, or rather appearing to eye them, through the void sockets, where eyes had once glistened, as they retreated one by one in the greatest fear and trepidation. When Peggy and I offered to decamp along with the rest, the spectre motioned us to remain where we were, and we durst not for our lives disobey. When the last of the crew was making his exit, and had crawled nearly to the door, the spectre, which had hitherto stood motionless, except waving its arm and slowly turning its eyeless countenance on the wretches as they crept successively out of the door, bounded with the rapidity of lightning after the terrified wretch. But swift as the flight of spirits are, in this case that of the mortal was swifter: the fellow gave a thrilling scream---made a convulsive spring---his heels struck violently against the lintel of the door in his course, and he vanished from my sight and the spectre after him. ‘Gude defend us,’ said Peggy. For my part, ill as I was frightened, I could scarce forbear laughing outright at the last incident so comic and farcical.

Half a minute had not elapsed, when I heard a step, and in another instant (I still kept my eyes on the door) in came the very form of my uncle, muttering, ‘Villains! Rascals! Hypocrites!’ He fastened the door

after him, shut out his nephews and the spectre, and then came towards the fire. At this I was more amazed than ever. He, however, gave me to understand that he was alive and well, and that all I had seen transacted in the afternoon and evening, was nothing but a stratagem he had made use of to try the sincerity of his relations, and if he found them, as he conjectured, false in their professions, to get rid of them. The scheme answered nobly, and, it must be confessed, the stratagem was well planned and exceedingly well executed.

My uncle concluded his relation with assuring me, that, excepting a good legacy for his faithful servant Peggy, I should inherit all that he possessed, as some little acknowledgement for the fright he had caused me; and as for the wretches he had expelled from his house, in so singular a manner, they should never more cross the threshold of his door. We all three now sat down to a little supper, of which my uncle stood in great need, and after taking a cheerful glass retired to bed.

Notwithstanding the fatigue of my journey, and sitting up so late, my sleep was far from being sound and refreshing. I was disturbed with fearful dreams the whole night. At length the cocks began to crow ---the clouds of the eastern sky to break

assunder, and the morning to dawn. When it was tolerably light I started up, resolved on a stroll over the meadows. Before going out, however, I went into the parlour, where I found every thing in the utmost confusion. Chairs, tables, walking-sticks, and logs of wood, lay all over the floor, and every thing upset or in a wrong position. I then proceeded to the outer door, which I opened, but started back in horror, on perceiving a human skull lying on a sheet at my right hand, just without the door. Recovering from my fright, I gathered it up, and could not restrain my laughter, when I discovered it to be nothing more than a mask, representing a death's head. It seems while we were all wrangling the night before, my uncle had stepped out of bed---dressed himself---piled all the furniture, logs of wood and timber, he could in the apartment, in a heap, crowning the pyramid with a dozen or more walking-sticks, which had lain time out of mind on the top of an old cupboard---then gone up stairs and put on the horrid mask---brought down a pistol, and enveloped himself from his feet to his chin, in a clean white sheet; after alarming us, just as the clock struck the awful hour of twelve, by striking three heavy blows against the wall with a huge log of wood, he contrived to tumble down the whole mass of furniture

at once---fired his pistol at the same moment, and then burst in upon us in the manner described.

I now went out. As I was crossing the yard, I discovered several drops of blood on a stone, which I could no way account for, but by supposing some of my good cousins had received, in their retreat, a fall; and, a little further, I discovered a pair of shoes. A receptacle for the filth of the byre, in another part of the yard, bore evident marks of some one having had therein a severe struggle.

Indeed the adventures of the flying heroes had been various and woful; one of them, he at whom the spectre had made such a sudden bound, as I afterwards ascertained, actually ran seven miles without stopping, and with his shrieks, supposing the grim monster close at his heels, almost raised the whole country. I now proceeded onwards over the fields, listening to the warbling lark 'springing blithely up to greet the purpling east.' The air was fresh and pure, and, in the beauties of nature, I awhile forgot the events of the preceding evening. With hasty steps I roved over the faintly recollected scenes, where I had in childhood spent some of my happiest hours, until weary with my rambles I returned to breakfast.

OUTWITTING A TAX-GATHERER.



SOME writers have stated the number of islands in Strangford Lough to be upwards of two hundred, but it has been ascertained that there are not more than fifty-four. Some are inhabited; on others cattle of various kinds are kept by the proprietors of the grounds on the opposite shore. Upon one of them there is a very extensive rabbit-warren. The individual who resides on this island had for many years derived a very considerable income from the sale of the rabbit skins, and although he had erected a very good house, he never once dreamed of paying any thing in the shape of excise or taxes. At length, however, a tax-gatherer, who had paid a visit to the houses on the neighbouring shore, beheld with anxious gaze the goodly edifice which presented itself upon the island, and determined upon visiting it in the name of his Majesty. The proprietor of the place, having been in the habit of receiving visits from persons who came to purchase his skins, and supposing the taxman to be one of them, sent off a boat to fetch him to the island. On reaching the place, the man of taxes began to make various enquires as to the time the house had

seen erected, the number of windows, hearths, &c., it contained: and, having gained the desired information, he immediately demanded, on behalf of his Majesty, a considerable sum, as the amount of taxes and arrears due upon the place. In vain the poor man protested against the proceeding, as an imposition, in vain he contended, that the demand, never having been made before, he had no right to pay it then. The stranger was inexorable, and nothing would satisfy him but the payment of the money down, or, in default thereof, he threatened to return direct, with a party of the army, and lead, drive, and carry away all that he could find upon the island. At length, fearing such a catastrophe, and finding every effort to soften the hard heart of the excise-man completely fruitless, the poor man paid down the amount demanded, and got a regular acknowledgement for the same; and the officer, having put the money in his pocket, haughtily desired that he might be put ashore. 'No, no,' said the old man; 'although his Majesty may compel me to pay taxes, he cannot compel me to keep a boat to row you, and the likes of you, back and forward.' After many threats and entreaties, the islander at last consented, as he had brought his visitor over, to give him 'a bit of a row' back again; and both get-

ting into the boat, along with a young lad, son to the proprietor, they pulled for some time in the direction of shore. When about midway, however, the islander, quietly laying down his oar, informed the officer, that although he had promised to give him 'a bit of a row,' he had never any intention of taking him the entire way, and that he must now do the best he could, as he was himself obliged to return to the island, or that they would land him on Phaddy Lhug, (a large rock, which was visible at low water, but was many feet beneath the surface at full tide,) from which, if he shouted loud enough, perhaps some of his friends on the shore might hear him, and send a boat to convey him the remainder of the distance. On the other protesting against such conduct, and insisting that they should continue their labour, and take him ashore---the old man, pulling his oar into the boat, and desiring his son to do the same, very drily observed, that if the gentleman did not wish to quit the boat, they would not insist upon his doing so, as they 'could swim like two water dogs, and thus easily regain the island; but that if he chose to pay him for it, he would willingly land him at any place he wished. Finding himself outwitted by the islanders, the officer deemed it the more advisable way to accede to the terms proposed---when, to his

astonishment, he found that the demand was nothing less than the entire amount he had received for the taxes, together with a receipt for those of the following year, and a special engagement, that he would never again return to that island to demand taxes on excise. Hard as the terms were, he was at length compelled to accede to them, rather than take on a tide which, at the time, was running at the rate of nine miles an hour, the alternative of being left to drift out to sea in an open boat, with scarcely a hope of relief from any quarter. It is scarcely necessary to observe, that having paid back the money, and giving the required receipt, the crest-fallen taxman was put safely ashore, and never again visited the island, or trusted himself in company with so tricky a customer as the old dealer in rabbit skins.



SCARLET DISCOVERED.

A Highlander entered a haberdasher's shop in Perth, and asked for a piece of scarlet cloth to make him a waistcoat. The rustic manner of the Gael set some young women who were at the counter a-giggling; and the shopman, willing to afford them sport, began to play off his small wit upon the

stranger. “So, goodman, ye want a piece of scarlet? Would you know scarlet if you saw it?” “I tink I would,” replied the mountaineer. The shopman threw down a piece of blue cloth: “Is that scarlet?” “Hout no, no! that no be it.” A piece of green cloth was produced; the same question was repeated, and received a similar answer, to the great amusement of the querist and his female friends, who were at no pains to conceal their mirth. The Highlander took revenge in his own way: He put his nose to the cloth, and affected to judge of the colour by the smell. The shopman, at his request, did the same; but the instant he bent his nose towards the counter, the Highlander seized him by the ears, and made his nasal protuberance come in such violent contact with the boards, that the blood sprung from it. “Tat,” said the Highlander, “is ta colour o’ scarlet tae ye noo, lad;” and he walked away.



